



## REVIEW ARTICLE

# PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AND STRESS AMONG THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explores the relationship between perceived social support and perceived stress among the university postgraduate students. Descriptive research study design was used and a sample of 84 university postgraduate students was drawn using purposive sampling technique. The multidimensional scale of perceived social support by Zimet *et al.* (1988), and perceived stress scale by Cohen and Williamson (1988) were administered on 84 university students within the age range of 20 to 25 years ( $M=22.13$ ,  $SD=.99$ ), and the sample comprised of 64 female (76.2%) and 20 male (23.8%). Statistical analyses of the research data reveal high perceived social support from family (60.7%), friends (58.3%) and significant others (58.3%) in university students; majority of the students (78.6%) reported moderate perceived stress, followed by severe (14.3%) and low perceived stress (7.1%). Female students showed greater perceived stress and greater perceived social support from significant others than male students, however, male students showed greater perceived social support from family and friends than female students. Findings of the present study show significant, negative correlation ( $r=-.25$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between perceived social support from significant others and perceived stress; significant, negative correlation ( $r=-.27$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between perceived social support from family and perceived stress; negative correlation ( $r=-.19$ ) between perceived social support from friends and perceived stress which confirms that perceived social support from significant others, family and friends helps in reducing perceived stress among the university students.

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## INTRODUCTION

Perceived social support is defined as the support obtained from other(s) which can enhance the emotional, social and psychological well-being of an individual. Researches have shown that perceived social support can have a positive impact on an individual (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). According to Paykani *et al.* (2020), perceived social support is a personal subjective evaluation of the availability of resources and the response received/acknowledged from the social environment. Gray *et al.* (2020) defined perceived social support as the psychological comfort and support provided by friends, family members and significant others. According to Zimet *et al.* (1988), perceived social support works as a buffer against stressors and it consists of three main dimensions, namely: (a) perceived social support from family is the extent to which individuals perceive the support they receive from their families in difficult times; (b) perceived social support from friends is the extent to which individuals perceive the support they receive from friends in the face of a problem; and (c) perceived social support from significant others is the extent to which individuals obtain support from special people in their life. Stress is an unpleasant condition marked by discomfort. According to Lazarus (1966), stress is defined as the relationship between an individual and the environment that is perceived to be exceedingly beyond an individual's ability to meet the external/internal demands.

There are several factors through which stress can affect us, such as, low social support, experiencing a transitional phase, e.g., entering university environment, forming and maintaining relationships with the opposite gender, and low emotional coping style due to inadequate channeling of emotions. In addition, stress can also arise from situations such as, family demands, pressure to succeed and environmental stressors (Sundarasan *et al.*, 2020).

**Relevant studies on perceived social support and stress in university students:** The challenges and experiences faced by the students at university are influenced by the relationships and support networks they perceived within and outside the university (Mishra, 2020). Research have shown that social relationships and social support are associated with the student's ability to tolerate stressors, and social support is one of the main predictors of successful transition into university environment (Cage *et al.*, 2021; Leary & DeRosier, 2012; Meehan & Howells, 2017; Van der Zandan *et al.*, 2018). Kim *et al.* (2018) also indicated that social support is a mechanism to allow the students to deal with the demands of academic life, and later professional life. According to a recent research study, Özer *et al.* (2021) found that perceived social support from friend and significant other, and perceived stress have a negative and low-level correlation, whereas perceived social support from family and perceived stress have negative and moderate relationships. Lee *et al.* (2002) claimed that social connectedness and perceived stress are closely related because perceived stress tend to decrease

with an overall increase in social connectedness in university students. Another group of researchers confirmed that availability of peer social support acts as a stress buffer and increase psychological wellbeing (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Winemiller *et al.*, 1993; Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Vungkhanching *et al.*, 2017). It has been found that peer support has the potential to promote a sense of belonging (Batchelor *et al.*, 2020). However, recent research by Mamun *et al.*'s (2019) indicated that being in a significant relationship can be a predictor of higher levels of stress, rather than providing social support.

**Why university students are prone to have perceived stress?** The transition from college to university environment makes a student undergo several changes in terms of adjustment, new lifestyle, and academic pressure to excel in examinations and competitions in addition to getting acquainted to university environment. This makes a student vulnerable to experience stress as they try to adapt to the new environment. The support one perceives that they receive from friends, family and significant others in order to deal with stressors have a greater role to play when it comes to reducing the stress level. According to Chao (2012) and Zimet *et al.* (1988), social support is a multidimensional concept which needs to be studied on the basis of the sources of social support. Thus, the need to study the sources of perceived support from significant others, family and friends in university students was deemed important in the present study with an aim to help the university students as they go through many life events and challenges towards successful transition into adulthood.

### Objectives

- To study the relationship between perceived social support from significant others and perceives stress in the university post-graduate students
- To study the relationship between perceived social support from family and perceives stress in the university post-graduate students
- To study the relationship between perceived social support from friends and perceives stress in the university post-graduate students

### Hypotheses

- Perceived social support from significant others and perceived stress will be significantly related in the university post-graduate students
- Perceived social support from family and perceived stress will be significantly related in the university post-graduate students
- Perceived social support from friends and perceived stress will be significantly related in the university post-graduate students

## METHODS

**Sample:** The sample consisted of 84 university post-graduate students pursuing their regular MSc degree course in one of the central university campuses in North-East India. Only those students who were free from any major illness and willing to give informed consent were considered for participation in this present study.

**Sampling Technique:** Descriptive research design was used and purposive sampling technique was employed for data collection.

### Measures

**Demographic Details:** Age, gender and stream of the Postgraduate degree course were collected from the sample for assessing the demographic details.

**The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet *et al.*, 1988)** was used to measure the perceived social support from significant other, family and friends, wherein higher score indicates greater perceived social support. It consists of 12 items rating on a

Likert scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). The scale used in the present study demonstrated good reliability with Cronbach's alpha value of 0.88.

**The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1988)** was used to measure the level of perceived stress among the university students. It consists of 10 items rating on a Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often), and has demonstrated superior psychometric properties (internal consistency and factor structure) (Cohen & Williamson, 1988). The Cronbach's alpha reliability value of perceived stress scale in the present study is 0.75, and the range of the score is 0 to 40 with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress and the categories of stress can be classified into low (0 to 13), moderate (14 to 26) and high (27 to 40).

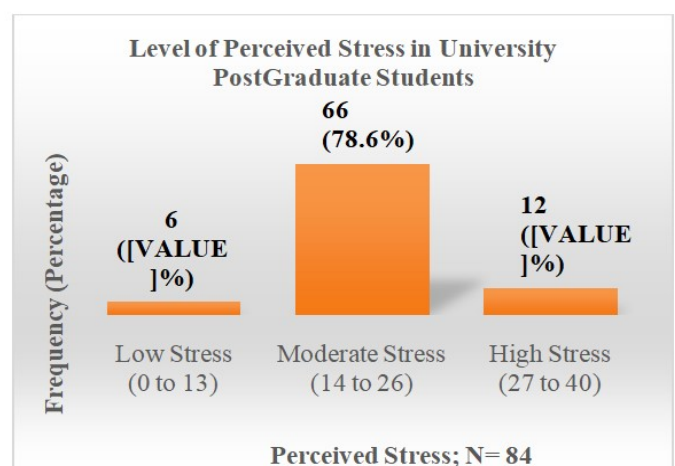
**Procedure:** Informed consent was obtained from the sample prior to data collection and they were briefed were about the questionnaires. Data collection was done in group size of 5 to 10 sample and the medium of test administration was in English. Data was collected from 84 university postgraduate students during August 2023 and each sample took approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete the test. Altogether 87 test questionnaires were administered, however, 3 test questionnaires were discarded due to incomplete response. Data collected were checked, scored and coded in SPSS for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics such as mean and SD were calculated. Pearson's product-moment correlation was performed to study the relationship perceived social support and perceived stress among the students.

## RESULTS

The Mean age of the sample was 22.13 years (SD=.99) within the range of 20 to 25 years. The sample comprised of 64 female (76.2%) and 20 male (23.8%). Statistical analyses of the research data reveal that majority of students (78.6%) reported moderate perceived stress, followed by severe (14.3%) and low perceived stress (7.1%) as shown in Figure 1.

**Table 1. Table showing the gender differences in perceived social support and perceived stress**

| Variable(s)                                      | Gender | N  | M     | SD   |
|--|--------|----|-------|------|
| Perceived Stress                                 | Male   | 20 | 19.35 | 5.16 |
|  | Female | 64 | 21.96 | 4.69 |
| Perceived Social Support from Significant Others | Male   | 20 | 20.90 | 5.71 |
|  | Female | 64 | 21.00 | 5.56 |
| Perceived Social Support from Family             | Male   | 20 | 20.70 | 4.94 |
|  | Female | 64 | 20.23 | 5.10 |
| Perceived Social Support from Friends            | Male   | 20 | 21.20 | 3.08 |
|  | Female | 64 | 20.40 | 4.87 |



**Figure 1. Figure showing the level of perceived stress in university postgraduate students**

Majority of the students reported high perceived social support from family (60.7%), friends (58.3%) and significant others (58.3%) as shown in Figure 3, 4 and 2 respectively.

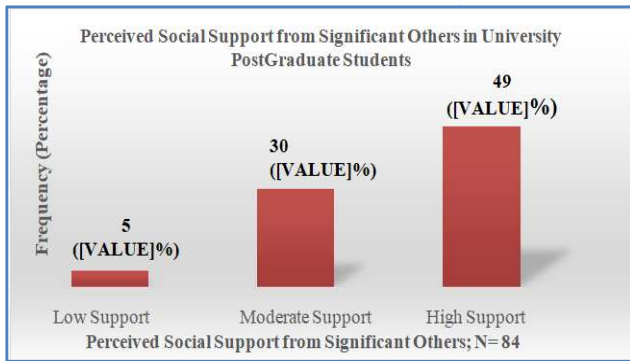


Figure 2. Figure showing the level of perceived social support from significant others in university postgraduate students

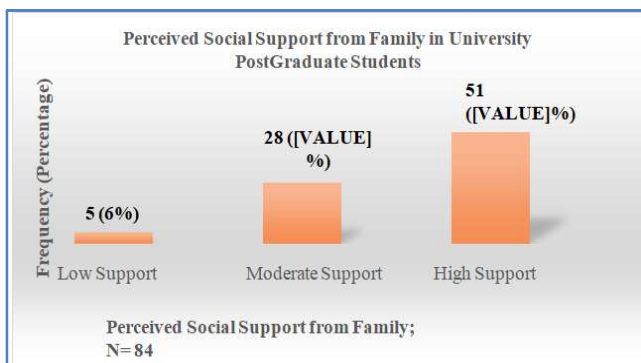


Figure 3. Figure showing the level of perceived social support from family in university postgraduate students

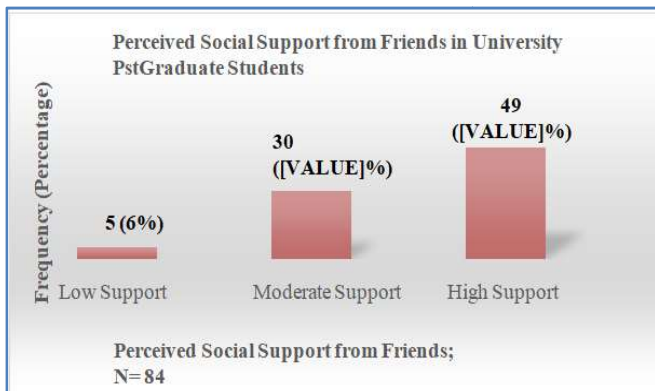


Figure 4. Figure showing the level of perceived social support from friends in university postgraduate students

Table 2 shows the gender differences in perceived social support and perceived stress in university post-graduate students. It was found that female students (M=21.96, SD= 4.69) have higher perceived stress than their male counterpart (M=19.35, SD= 5.16). It was also found that female students (M=21.00, SD= 5.56) have greater perceived social support from significant others than the male students (M=20.90, SD=5.71), however, male students (M=20.70, SD=4.94; M=21.20, SD=3.08) reported greater perceived social support from family and friends than female students (M=20.23, SD=5.10; M=20.40, SD=4.87). Result in Table 2 revealed significant negative correlation ( $r=-.25, p<.01$ ) between perceived social support from significant others and perceived stress among the university post-graduate students, thus accepting H1; significant negative correlation ( $r=-.27, p<.01$ ) between perceived social support from family and perceived stress among the post-graduate university students which proved H2.

Table 2. Table showing the Pearson correlation between perceived stress and perceived social support from significant others, family and friends in university postgraduate students

| Variable(s)                   |                    | Pearson Correlation |      |                  |  |       |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------|------------------|--|-------|
|                               |                    | Mean                | SD   | Perceived Stress | Perceived Social Support from Significant Others |       |
| Perceived Stress              |                    | 21.34               | 4.91 | 1                |  |       |
| Perceived Social Support from | Significant Others | 20.97               | 5.56 | -.25*            | 1  |       |
|                               | Family             | 20.34               | 5.04 | -.27*            | .35**  | 1     |
|                               | Friends            | 20.59               | 4.50 | -.19             | .54**  | .32** |

N= 84; \*  $p<.05$ ; \*\*  $p<.01$

There was negative correlation ( $r= -.19$ ) between perceived social support from friends and perceived stress among the post-graduate university students, however the negative correlation was not significant, thus H3 is not supported.

## DISCUSSION

The present research study was an attempt to explore the relationship between perceived social support and perceived stress among the university postgraduate students. Results indicated that there was significant, negative correlation between perceived social support from significant others and perceived stress which was in support of previous research findings by Özer *et al.* (2021) wherein they found significant, negative correlation between perceived social support from significant others and perceived stress. However, the present findings contradict another previous study by Mamun *et al.*'s (2019) which indicated that having a significant other in life can be a predictor of higher levels of stress, rather than having perceived social support. It may be mentioned that having a special someone in life may not be always turned out to be as one would have had hoped for, but the present findings are indicative that the social support perceived from significant others would help in reducing the level of perceived stress among the university students. The correlation between perceived social support from family and perceived stress in this study was significant and negative which shows that perceiving strong family network and support will decrease the level of perceived stress. This is supported by previous research findings which claimed that social support is a predictor of successful transition into university environment, and a mechanism to deal with the demands of academic life (Leary & De Rosier, 2012; Meehan & Howells, 2017; Van der Zandan *et al.*, 2018; Kim *et al.* 2018; Cage *et al.*, 2021).

The current findings highlight the role of strong family support and perceiving the significant contribution of parents, siblings and relatives in the overall well-being of university students. Özer *et al.* (2021) reconfirmed the findings of the present study that perceived social support from family and perceived stress have significant, negative relationship. There was low negative correlation between perceived social support and perceived stress among the university postgraduate students in the present study, which was supported by previous research findings claiming that social connectedness and perceived stress are closely linked as increased social connectedness tend to decrease perceived stress (Lee *et al.*, 2002) Another group of researchers also confirmed that peer social support provide buffer against stress, promote a sense of belonging and increase psychological wellbeing (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Winemiller *et al.*, 1993; Batchelor *et al.*, 2020).The present findings indicate that all these potentials could be utilized if one has the adequate amount of perceived social support from their near and dear ones. The sources of social support i.e., perceived social support from family, friends and significant others will go a long way in in helping the university students to successfully manage stress and maintain his/her overall well-being.

### Limitations

- The present study was conducted on a relatively small sample in one of the central universities in North-East India, and thus, it may be difficult to generalize the findings.

- The findings are limited to the measurement tools used in the present study.
- The sample of this study was limited to students who were pursuing regular postgraduate degree course in a university campus.

#### Suggestions for future study

- Similar studies may be conducted on a large-scale sample across different states/culture/courses of study.
- Different measurement tools of stress may be used in future studies. Likewise, different measurement tools of the sources of social support may also be applied.
- Attempts could be made to sensitize the university students on the importance of having a healthy social support network.

## CONCLUSION

The present research study was an attempt to explore the relationship between perceived social support and perceived stress among the university post-graduate students. Two scales namely multidimensional scale of perceived social support and perceived stress scale were administered on a sample of 84 university post-graduate students. The mean age of the sample was 22.13 years (SD=.99) and the sample comprised of 64 female (76.2%) and 20 male (23.8%). Statistical analyses of research data reveals that 78.6 % of students have moderate perceived stress, 14.3% have severe stress and 7.1% have low stress. Furthermore, 60.7% students reported high perceived social support from family, 58.3% have high perceived social support from friends and significant others. Findings of the present study confirmed negative relationship between perceived social support from significant others, family and friends, and perceived stress among the university students.

**Conflict of interest:** The researcher declares there is no conflict of interest in this research study.

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